

**Review: *The Colour Fantastic:
Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema*;
Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe,
*Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema,
and Media of the 1920s***

Patrick Adamson

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The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema

Edited by Giovanna Fossati, Victoria Jackson, Bregt Lameris, Elif Rongen-Kaynakçi, Sarah Street, and Joshua Yumibe
Amsterdam University Press, 2018

Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s

By Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe
Columbia University Press, 2019

Reviewed by Patrick Adamson, University of St Andrews

Truism or not, scholarly interest in the use of colour in silent cinema has certainly grown in recent years. One need not look much beyond the covers of 2015's lavishly illustrated *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press) or 2019's *Color Mania: The Material of Color in Photography and Film* (Lars Müller Publishers) to find original and often revelatory research in this sub-field. But as is generally the case with overdue recognition, this sudden surge follows on from a period of undue neglect. In no small way, early colour's current boom owes to its status as a "new" field for study – one with a brief and distinct genealogy easily traceable over the past quarter-century.

Released in the Aprils of 2018 and 2019 respectively, *The Colour Fantastic: Chromatic Worlds of Silent Cinema* and *Chromatic Modernity: Color, Cinema, and Media of the 1920s* make something truly compelling of this process of rediscovery. In recovering not only the oft-overlooked uses and discourses of early colour but how these informed film history more generally, they offer rare testament, and indeed testimony, to the very keenly felt necessity behind recent decades' outpouring of research in this area. Sharing in the imperatives of this heritage, these are titles linked by more than their subject matter and common inclusion of high-quality frame scans, illustrations, and diagrams. Both owe a stated debt to 1995's ground-breaking Amsterdam workshop: "Colours in Silent Film", which EYE Chief Curator (and *Colour Fantastic* co-editor) Giovanna Fossati explicitly credits with inaugurating the new era of research into the topic.

To begin with *The Colour Fantastic*, it is the direct product of a 2015 EYE Filmmuseum conference, which was itself arranged with a mind to reflecting on the first two decades of the colour turn. Sarah Street and Joshua Yumibe co-organised the event, as part of the research project that became *Chromatic Modernity* (moreover, the aforementioned *Fantasia of Color in Early Cinema* was launched at it).

Quite fittingly, the resulting edited collection opens with a return to those decisive days of the 1990s, when the study of silent film colour set out on its current course. In a candid and engaging prologue, Peter Delpout – former Artistic Deputy Director of the Nederlands Filmmuseum (1988–1995) – recalls the first steps in this incipient scholarly direction, along with the people that took them. Of his own signal efforts in bringing the extent of past colour-usage to broader notice, he states that his found-footage film *Lyrical Nitrate* (1991) is "a document of a revolution": "Colour is there and has no plans to leave" (29). A personal highlight of the collection – vivid, suggestive, even oddly stirring – this opening persuasively attests to the corrective resolve that was behind the chromatic surge in early cinema studies: to restore an overlooked cultural heritage, uncover local and technological specificities, and challenge the deterministic orthodoxies of film historiography, which have so long reduced this story to the development and adoption of natural colour in Hollywood.

After this rousing prologue, the volume is organised thematically, with the first of its four sections being on non-fiction and amateur filmmaking. Elena Gipponi gets things underway by highlighting small-gauge cinematography's crucial contribution to the development of colour reproduction techniques: 8mm, 9.5mm, and 16mm users comprised the original market and test audience for a number of 1920s and 1930s colour film processes – something she demonstrates through contemporary instructional literature and the preserved home movie collections of hobbyist pioneers, including Guglielmo Baldassini (1885-1952) and Piero Portaluppi (1888-1967). Spectacles are afforded particular attention here, with firework displays and carnivals centred in the analysis; scenes from nature are, nevertheless, also considered. It is this latter aspect – cinema's depictions of the natural world – that Liz Watkins and Jennifer Peterson revisit and nuance in the next two chapters, on the frozen white landscape of the poles and the powerfully poetic motions of rough seas respectively. Watkins adopts an intermedial framework to demonstrate the profound role that applied colour played in experiencing the polar exploration films of the 1910s and 1920. Dissatisfied with the direct photographic registration of visual phenomena, the likes of Herbert Ponting used tinting, toning, and hand-painting to contrive sensual and temporal impressions based upon “recollection[s] of the chromatic effects of light refracted by the Antarctic ice” (57). Peterson likewise turns to intermediality when exploring how the silent-era trope of crashing waves – often found in nonfiction titles, such as travelogues and scenic films – drew upon Romantic aesthetic traditions, with applied colour again serving affective ends. Realism and sensation, the indexical and the sensual functions of colour, are yoked together throughout this section.

By uncovering alternative histories and foregrounding the diversity of intent behind early colour-usage, the first chapters of this collection present a strong justification for one of the field's guiding principles: read together, they contradict linear models in which the history of film colour is reducible to the film industry's teleological pursuit of ever greater realism. This push for sophisticated, historicised readings is extended into what might be considered more mainstream territory in the collection's second section. “Natural-Colour Processes: Theory and Practice” begins with John Belton on a Hollywood spectacular that was shot entirely in two-colour Technicolor, Douglas Fairbanks' *The Black Pirate* (1926). He interprets Fairbanks' commitment to using a purposely subdued palette as indicative of a wider film-industrial anxiety about colour technology having a potentially distractive impact upon audiences. Benoît Turquety then looks at a 2008 Screen Archive South East restoration project involving 1908 Kinemacolor films, linking past attitudes towards additive colour processes to the archival and historiographical quandaries of today. Again, the possibility of bringing a new chromatic perspective to familiar aspects of Hollywood history emerges when Hilde D'hayere traces Hollywood comedy pioneer Mack Sennett's adoption of colour processes across silent comedies, Depression-era talkies, and small-gauge 1930s Kodascope re-releases of his earlier material. Closing the section and complementing the earlier piece by Turquety, Screen Archive South East's Frank Gray compares the developments of additive and subtractive processes, specifically Kinemacolor and Kodachrome.

The next block, “Intermediality and Advertising”, lives up to its title and expands the volume's perspective for it, opening with a piece by Kirsten Moana Thompson on the animated advertisement signs of Broadway and Times Square. Framing signage and cinema within a wider horizon of visual cultural forms, she explores the former's liberal use of colour from the 1890s on. In the following chapter, Natalie Snoyman examines the Kodachrome *McCall Colour Fashion News* shorts, made between 1925 and 1928 in conjunction with the popular pattern magazine *McCall's*. Once more, chromatic concerns are shown to transcend any one medium or industry, meeting in

this instance at the intersections of film, fashion, and commerce. Returning to the reflexive function of applied colour, Federico Pierotti then draws parallels between advertising and 1920s French avant-garde films on the basis that they appeal to a visual culture predisposed to subjective, intense, and non-indexical techniques rather than inviting the more classical spectatorial tendencies that were then taking hold among cinemagoers.

The third section, “Archiving and Restoration: Early Debates and Current Practices” begins with Bregt Lameris’ chapter on the 1927 founding of the *Ligue du noir et blanc* – a group of young Parisian cinephiles that might easily be characterised as chromophobic for their opposition to natural colour systems. Instead, Lameris uncovers their long-overlooked place within a more complex debate about colour’s *function* and its potential to serve an artistic purpose beyond the mere imitation of reality. This comparatively brief section ends with Barbara Flueckiger, Claudy Op den Kamp, and David Pfluger’s overview of three University of Zurich-based research projects pertaining to the digitisation of early colour film material: “Timeline of Historical Film Colors”, “DIASTOR”, and “ERC Advanced Grant FilmColors”. As in D’hayere’s earlier discussion of Kodascope libraries, the issue of afterlives emerges as a concern here, albeit with a new urgency prompted by the developments and challenges of the digital turn. With technological limitations, the potential for obsolescence, practical issues, and ethical concerns all shown to impact upon approaches to digitisation and restoration, the trio insist upon the need for consistent and systematic practice in their field. Two brief roundtable abstracts from the 2015 EYE Filmmuseum event round off the collection, providing further welcome coverage of current archival policies and access policies.

Picking up perhaps *the* most common recurring thread from *The Colour Fantastic*, Street and Yumibe’s *Chromatic Modernity* again takes as a starting point the interrelationship between advertising and cinema. But this is by no means to bemoan any putative lack of originality; far from it. Rather, the pair’s assiduous, interdisciplinary approach to what has often been dismissed as little more than a transitional decade for cinematic colour-usage results in an authoritative and necessary reconsideration of a long-mischaracterised period.

In short, *Chromatic Modernity* reads cinema within a broader 1920s “chromatic revolution”, granting it a central role in a vibrant set of cultural discourses involving art, colour science, and philosophy. Its focus encompasses American and European trends, with their cross-germinating intellectual formations and interlinked industrial trajectories serving as testament to the experimentation, exchange, and collaboration that governed modernist developments.

Rather than downplaying the intermedial exchanges of earlier days on the basis that this was a key decade of consolidation for Hollywood filmmaking as its *own* distinct art form, Street and Yumibe instead foreground them. In doing so, they stress a fundamental continuity of colour consciousness that united producers and consumers across multiple products and media. The period at hand played host to not only mounting interest in advertising science and public relations but also a drive to standardise the “meaning” of colour, in which fashion, interior design, advertising, and urban planning were all involved. In tracing these shifts and reconfigurations within the media landscape, *Chromatic Modernity* recovers an overlooked facet of the history of not only colour in cinema but a linked array of cultural series too.

Chapter One explores post-Great War efforts in codifying colour-usage through the various global companies and institutions that were then involved in trying to develop colourmetric standards. Unlike in later chapters, the focus here is firmly on industrial history, specifically the research endeavours of companies such as Eastman Kodak, Technicolor, and Pathé Frères. In

practice the influence of this work turned out not to be as unidirectional as might be imagined; companies could not simply foist their findings upon consumers. Enlarged by mass media and increasingly judicious for it, the consuming public are shown to have had their own significant impact on the colour debate. Continuing the focus on standardisation efforts, Chapter Two then uncovers a wider effort to influence popular tastes, noting its profound impact upon the mass consumption ideologies of the 1920s. Colour became a mediating agent between hierarchical cultural practices – design, fashion, art – and, for it, being colour conscious became a means of negotiating modernity. Much as in the previous chapter, the fact that chromatic tendencies beyond those of filmmakers are examined at such length proves well justified, for they are all aspects integral to the history of the “revolution” at hand, having shaped its mores and guided its technological innovations. Nevertheless, these opening chapters together make clear the certain prominence that film did enjoy in this discourse. As well as being a focal point for experimentation, it was an inherently cosmopolitan medium – or so its advocates insisted. Its democratic and “universal” potential – a singular capacity for reaching mass audiences and engendering common experiences – made it sure to enact a particular sway over the day’s trends.

The following chapters touch upon concerns that recall somewhat those encountered in *The Colour Fantastic*. Chapter Three details contemporary developments in theatre lighting and colour-light displays, while also attesting to their lasting impact upon popular colour consciousness. Familiar discourses prompted experimentation in this domain; media were to be combined and audiences educated as to modern colour standards. Another artistic usage of colour provides the focus for Chapter Four. Avant-garde films, notable movements, and filmmaking sensibilities, many of them staples of the film-historical canon, are discussed but through their innovations in terms of chromatic style. Colour, argue Street and Yumibe, “was as important to the international formation of modernism as it was to industrial modernity” (149). A comparatively brief Chapter Five then examines hybridity and changing colour aesthetics through popular cinema. The examples used include *The Ten Commandments* (1923), *The Phantom of the Opera* (1925), and *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1925), along with a number of other films that combine multiple colour systems: tinting, toning, stencil colour, Handschiegl, Technicolor. Bringing a modernist, abstract sensibility to popular entertainment, such practice would prove largely unique to the silent era.

It is in these later chapters that one of the overarching themes of the volume emerges most forcefully: that filmmakers’ demands for new ways of creatively expressing themselves brought together concerns both industrial and affective and, in doing so, prompted new innovation in colour reproduction. For their final chapter, Street and Yumibe attempt to reconcile these elements against *the* landmark technological change of the 1920s: the widespread adoption of sound. Preferences in terms of technology also shifted around this time, as can be seen in the general decline of applied processes. And it is so – with the technical and cultural issues of this transitional moment in mind – that the pair lay their final claim as to film-historical importance of 1920s colour.

The Colour Fantastic and *Chromatic Modernity* are undoubtedly two significant contributions to their growing sub-field. Alongside their historicised analyses of the films at hand, these volumes together work to nuance the reductive and anachronistic doctrines of earlier film historiography. They promote a fastidious treatment of relevant key contexts, from aesthetic discourses and polemics to technological and cultural innovations. And yet, equally, they prove that insisting upon the complexity of this history and eschewing simple linear explanations is not to make it inaccessible to non-colour specialists – such is the profound impression of originality and scholarly

necessity created by their consistently sophisticated argumentation and deftly articulated interventions.